

10/26/20 Wires

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US Limits on Foreign Media Visas Threaten Press Freedom - Correspondents Association

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - Possible changes to the visa issuance rules for foreign journalists in the United States pose a threat to media freedom there, the Association of Foreign Press Correspondents in the USA (AFC-USA) said in a statement on Monday.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a statement last month that it has proposed limiting the duration of visas issued to foreign journalists to 240 days with an opportunity to obtain a maximum extension of 240 days.

"The AFC-USA acknowledges and fully respects the right of the US government to protect its national security, adjust its immigration laws with priority to the interest of American citizens, and combat abuse of immigration laws in any visa category," the statement said. "However, as far as professional, working and credentialed foreign correspondents are concerned, changes to I Media visa approval processes pose threats to their livelihoods and the future of press freedom within the United States."

At present, foreign journalists can stay in the United States as long as they continue to perform their duties in compliance with the terms of admission. The DHS has also proposed putting limits on foreign student visas from two to four years. These student visas allow foreign nationals to remain in the United States for as long as they maintain compliance with the admission terms.

The DHS explained that the significant growth of the F, J and I visa programs has necessitated the proposed update to ensure the integrity of the US immigration system, and added that no changes are proposed to the underlying requirements to qualify for these nonimmigrant classifications.

The AFC-USA noted that the I Media visa does not allow foreign journalists the right to work in the United States except for media organizations that sponsor them and consequently they do not compete with Americans for jobs.

"Unless they belong to a particular category of extraordinary, talented people, it's almost impossible for foreign correspondents to convert into green card [permanent residency card] holders," the statement said. "Neither can foreign correspondents be considered a national threat to US security. Any single foreign journalist granted an I Media Visa must provide detailed documentation to the US embassy... to prove their status as professional journalists."

The AFC-USA acknowledged there is a possibility the visa can potentially be abused, but said it doubts the number of suspected cases.

"It is our understanding that a significant aspect of the alleged problem is that the US government over the years has failed to adopt and apply a mechanism to ensure that those granted I Media visas for a duration of five years are working as foreign journalists for the full duration of their visa for the media organizations that initially sponsored them for the visa," the statement said.

The AFC-USA noted that the US State Department's Foreign Press Centers lack resources to efficiently and effectively update their records of foreign journalists who may not continue to work for the media organizations that initially sponsored their I Media visas.

"That proposal aims more to dismantle foreign media representation in America and less on building a new base focused on a strong, transparent and secured relationship with foreign media representatives in the United States," the statement said.

The AFC-USA also said the provision within the DHS proposal sets the US framework to eliminate the number of foreign press representatives who work in the United States and forbid media organizations from foreign countries to have permanent representation there.

"We consider this policy provision hostile to the interests of the members of our foreign correspondent community," the statement said. "The proposal only results in upending the lives of professional working journalists who work for foreign media. This proposal impedes foreign societies' right to access reliable firsthand information from their correspondents in America."

The AFC-USA said it strongly opposes the DHS policy proposal and added that it has its own counterproposal that distinguishes journalists who are sent on a particular assignment to the United States versus those who are permanent employee of media outlets.

"Cases of foreign journalists who intend to be in the United States to pursue and execute a specific assignment cannot and must not fall under the same category as foreign correspondents who are permanent employees of media organizations based abroad," the statement said.

In addition, the duration of an I Media visa should not be for less than two years with the possibility of an additional two-year extension upon renewal, the AFC-USA said.

"These journalists remain full-time employees of the foreign media organizations that sponsor their I Media visa from their country of origin. Their status must be accorded the needed attention under the new proposal," the statement said.

The AFC-USA characterized the DHS policy proposal as an attack on the international press at a time when threats to independent media are increasingly serious and daunting.

"Journalists who have long represented their country's independent media in the United States are now being forced to return to dangerous environments where they risk retaliation because they've done critical, truthful reporting while in the States. It is doubly tragic and it seems so unnecessary to put them in danger and to deny millions around the world a crucial source of independent coverage from the United States," the statement said.

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SOFIA Stratosphere Observatory Finds Water on Sunlit Surface of Moon - NASA

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - A US-German infrared telescope operated from aircraft flying in the stratosphere nine miles high has confirmed the existence of water encased in glass beads on the sunlit surface of the Moon, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) said on Monday.

"NASA's Stratospheric Observatory for Infrared Astronomy (SOFIA) has confirmed, for the first time, water on the sunlit surface of the Moon," the agency said in a press release. "This discovery indicates that water may be distributed across the lunar surface, and not limited to cold, shadowed places.

SOFIA detected water molecules in the Clavius Crater, one of the largest craters visible from Earth in the Moon's southern hemisphere in concentrations of 100 to 412 parts per million - equivalent to a 12-ounce bottle of water in a cubic meter of soil spread across the lunar surface, NASA explained.

"Prior to the SOFIA observations, we knew there was some kind of hydration. But we didn't know how much, if any, was actually water molecules - like we drink every day - or something more like drain cleaner," NASA scientist Casey Honniball of the Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, said.

NASA cautioned that the Sahara Desert has 100 times the amount of water than what SOFIA detected in the lunar soil. However, the upcoming Viper land rover unmanned expedition to the Moon will search for water up to three feet below the lunar surface, NASA said.

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Huawei CFO's Extradition Trial Resumes With Canadian Law Enforcement Officials Testifying

TORONTO, October 26 (Sputnik) - The extradition trial of Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou resumed on Monday with members Canada's law enforcement agencies taking the stand and expected to testify for the remainder of the week.

Meng herself is attending this week's sessions as her lawyers argue that an abuse of process occurred during the arrest as part of coordinated action against her originating from the United States and that Canadian law enforcement agencies violated the Huawei executive's rights protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms by denying her access to legal counsel.

"During a five-day cross examination of witnesses, Ms. Meng's lawyers will probe the extent to which Trump administration of officials directed [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] RCMP and [Canadian Border Services Agency] CBSA officer s to engage in a deceptive and improper search, thereby violating a court order and Ms. Meng's Charter rights," Huawei Canada said in a statement on Monday.

Meng is wanted by US authorities for her alleged role in violating sanctions against Iran. The US Justice Department alleges that Meng committed financial transgressions by misleading multinational financial conglomerate, HSBC, into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014.

Associate Chief Justice Heather Holmes previously ruled against Meng's bid to scrap the extradition proceedings in May and denied Meng's request for access to confidential documents earlier this month.

Meng's detention has led to a deterioration of Sino-Canadian relations and, according to Canadian officials, was allegedly a contributing factor to the arrest of two Canadian nationals -

former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor – on charges of espionage in China.

Both Beijing and Ottawa view the detention of their nationals as political incidents.

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Esper, India Defense Minister Reinforce Commitment to Military Cooperation - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Mark Esper has met with his Indian counterpart Rajnath Singh ahead of the bilateral 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue in New Delhi and discussed military cooperation, the Defense Department said in a statement on Monday. "Secretary Esper and Minister Singh ... reinforced their commitment to deepening military-to-military cooperation, including joint-service cooperation; increasing secure communications capabilities; and enhancing mutual logistics engagements," the statement said. The Defense Department said the two military officials praised the conclusion of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement between two countries and supported the expansion of information-sharing between them.

Esper and Singh also agreed to cooperate in addressing global security challenges, the statement added.

New Delhi and Washington are scheduled to sign the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA) on October 27, a source at the Indian Defense Ministry told Sputnik earlier on Monday.

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REVIEW - Biden Leads in Final Stretch, Yet Key Swing States Remain in 'Too Close to Guess' Category

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential challenger Joe Biden has maintained his lead in most battleground states, with just over a week until election day, yet slim margins and complicating factors such as mail-in ballots make the race practically impossible to predict.

Biden, as of Monday afternoon, leads nationally by 7.9% on average in the 11 most recent surveys posted on poll aggregator Reaclearpolitics.com (RCP), dropping one point from where it stood a week ago.

However, the national popular vote is irrelevant given the format of the electoral college, which requires candidates to win statewide contests. In 2016, Hillary Clinton won the national popular vote by 2.1% but lost the election because she failed to win enough electoral votes, 538 of which are apportioned across 50 states. A candidate must win 270 electoral votes to be declared the winner.

STATE OF THE RACE

The Biden camp is extremely nervous about history repeating itself. Jen O'Malley Dillon, Biden's campaign manager, in a recent memo to supporters said the race is "far closer" than some of the punditry would suggest.

"In the key battleground states where this election will be decided, we remain neck and neck with [President] Donald Trump," Dillon said as quoted by Politico last week.

Biden is ahead in ten of the top 12 battleground states, but all of his leads are within a typical margin of error, except in Michigan, where he has an 8.1% edge. Biden's lead is under three percent in 5 states: Florida (+1.5%), North Carolina (+1.2%), Georgia (+0.4%), Arizona (2.4%), and Iowa (0.8%).

The former vice president is leading by 4-6 percent in the remaining four states: Pennsylvania (+4.9%), Wisconsin (+5.4%), Minnesota (+6.0%), and Nevada (5.2%), according to the RCP average.

Trump leads in Texas by 2.6 percent and has maintained about a half-point lead in Ohio.

These RCP poll averages in the past few days have fluctuated more than stock prices and are bound to change before November 3 - the question remains to what extent. The margins have been volatile but within a 1-percent flat range except in Arizona and North Carolina where Biden's lead dropped by 1.5% in each and in Texas where Trump lost 1.2 points in the past week.

The significance of the margin of error (MOE) cannot be understated when assessing these leads because the typical MOE of 3% actually implies a swing of up to six points in either direction. For example, Biden is up 50-45% on average (rounding up slightly) in Pennsylvania, but when we apply the typical MOE of 3% this suggests the lead could be as much as 11 points (53-42%) or it could mean Trump is actually ahead by 1 point (48-47%). For the Biden camp, any lead less than 7% is probably too close for comfort.

Although we are only about eight days away from the election, it is worth considering that Clinton was ahead in the polls at this point in 2016 in seven of these states - and by a greater margin than where Biden is today in four of them. By the eve of the 2016 election, Clinton's lead had entirely vanished in three states and fell by 3.9 points to 1.9% in Pennsylvania and by 2 points in 2 other states.

When comparing the RCP average on the night before the 2016 election with the actual results, it appears Clinton's poll numbers were inflated by 7.2% in Wisconsin, 3.1% in Michigan and 2.6% in Pennsylvania - 3 states she was favored to win but lost. The numbers were also inflated by 4.5% in Ohio and 6.5% in Iowa, two states she lost by more than expected and inflated by 5.7% in Minnesota - a blue state she won by only 1.5 points.

Technically speaking, however, in only one of these states, Wisconsin, could the polling be considered "wrong," because the rest were within a 3 percent MOE (which implies the possibility of a 6-point swing).

The Democrats are worried polling in swing states might be inflated due to the "hidden" Trump voter phenomenon, the efficacy of Republican voter suppression efforts, and the number of mail-in ballots that could be disqualified for a number of reasons, the report added.

Even if pollsters have better accounted for key demographics - such as non-degreed white males - it is hard to factor in the number of ballots that could be rejected on technical grounds -

or for simply arriving too late. Experts have said the massive influx of mailed ballots could increase the rejection rate to up to 2 percent.

As of Sunday evening, nearly 60 million early votes have already been cast, including almost 40 million by mail, according to the US Elections Project which consolidates polling data from each state. In 2016, only about 33 million ballots were submitted via the postal service.

In Pennsylvania, 1.4 million votes have been cast by mail of 2.9 million ballots requested. In 2016, only about 330,000 Pennsylvanians cast ballots by mail of just over 6 million total votes. In 2016, Trump won Pennsylvania by just over 44,000 votes (0.7% margin).

It is impossible to tell what this means for Biden's lead. So much more than just a grain of salt comes with the below estimated scenarios.

PATHS TO 270

If the election were held today, and we assume the polls are 100% accurate, Biden would win by a 357-181 electoral college landslide by capturing all of the aforesaid swing states except Texas and Ohio. This seems unlikely, given the factors mentioned, but Biden still has more "paths to victory," than Trump, who would have to win eight of 12 swing states, among which he only leads in two.

If we assume the polls are inflated in Biden's favor, we could conduct a sensitivity analysis based on a range of reasonable MOEs to determine possible scenarios. The good news for Biden is that even if one applies the exact percentage the polls were off in 2016, Biden would win 325 electoral votes. Largely because the margin of error in Florida in 2016 equated to a 1-point swing (MOE = 0.5%) and Biden is up by 1.5 percent.

If we apply a full 1-percent MOE (2-point swing) across all 12 states - a legitimate possibility given the factors mentioned - Biden ends up with 290. If we apply a 2% MOE (4-point swing), Biden would lose Arizona yet still capture a threshold-crossing 279 electoral votes. If forced to guess, it seems highly likely that Biden would reach at least this figure.

Hence, for Trump to have a chance, it seems to boil down to Pennsylvania and/or Wisconsin. If Trump then takes Wisconsin, where he is down 4.6%, the electoral college would end up tied 269-269.

Determining who wins the presidency would be up to the House of Representatives, according to the 12th amendment, and the Senate would pick the vice president, which has not happened in almost 200 years. Although the Democrats have a 32-seat majority in the 435-member House, the constitution says each state would only get one vote and the Republicans, it turns out, happen to control more states. Hence, Trump would win. This scenario might be far-fetched, but one we cannot entirely rule out.

In conclusion, the odds seem in favor of Biden winning at least 279 to as many as 290 electoral votes. However, it bears reiterating that most of these swing states fall into the "too close to call" category. And a week is a long time. Given the Great Collapse of 2016, election day could not come soon enough for the Biden campaign.

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Twitter Adds Banner on Its Platform to Debunk US Election Misinformation - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The social media giant Twitter said in a statement on Monday that it has added a banner on its platform to debunk any misinformation related to the US presidential election.

"Election 2020 is unlike any other in US history," the statement said. "With so many more people voting by mail and potentially delayed results, starting today, we'll show you prompts in your Home timeline and Search to help you stay informed on these critical topics."

This year, Twitter has blocked or limited any alleged misinformation related to the upcoming presidential election, including issues surrounding mail-in voter fraud or statements that incite violence.

President Donald Trump has had several of his messages on Twitter were flagged over information he put out regarding mail-in voter fraud and other issues. Trump has also criticized Twitter and other social media platforms for censoring articles and other information that are critical of his rival Joe Biden.

More than 60 million Americans have cast early ballots in the US presidential election scheduled for November 3. Of those, more than 40 million votes were cast via mail-in ballots and nearly 20 million votes were cast in person, according to the US Elections Project.

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US Imposes Sanctions on Iran's Ministry of Petroleum, Oil Minister, Others - Treasury

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on Iran's Petroleum and Oil Minister Bijan Zangeneh as well as on ten entities, seven individuals and two vessels, the US Department of the Treasury said in a statement on Monday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is designating the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum, the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), and the National Iranian Tanker Company (NITC) pursuant to E.O. 13224, as amended, a counterterrorism authority, for their financial support to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF)," the statement said.

The Treasury Department explained that several individuals have been designated for maintaining close links to former Petroleum Minister and IRGC-QF official Rostam Ghasemi while others have been added to the sanctions list because of their connections to Venezuela.

"The regime in Iran uses the petroleum sector to fund the destabilizing activities of the IRGC-QF," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said.

Mnuchin accused Iran of supporting terrorism and advancing a nuclear program over the needs of the Iranian people.

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US Blocks Cuban Military-Run Entities From Processing Remittance Transactions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is blocking Cuban military-run entities from processing remittance-related transactions, the US Department of the Treasury said in a press release on Monday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) amended the Cuban Assets Control Regulations (CACR) to remove Cuba's military-run entities from the remittance process," the release said.

The Treasury Department explained it will refer Cuban military-run entities or subentities on the State Department's Cuba Restricted List.

US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said that individuals in the United States will not be able to process remittances to or from Cuba through FINCIMEX, whose parent company American International Services is on the Cuba Restricted List.

Mnuchin also said Cuban military-run institutions like FINCIMEX charge fees to benefit the country's armed forces.

The new restriction will go into effect in 30 days, the release said.

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US Foreign Media Visa Limits Threaten Press Freedom - Correspondents Association

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The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a statement in September that it has proposed to limit the duration of visas issued to foreign journalists to 240 days with an opportunity to obtain a maximum extension of 240 days.

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Trump Says Ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh 'Holding'

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump told reporters on Monday that the US-brokered ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region is holding.

"It's holding. The ceasefire is holding," Trump said.

The ceasefire went into effect on Sunday, however, the Azerbaijan Defense Ministry claimed earlier today that the Armenian military had shelled settlements in the Terter region near the contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Armenian Defense Ministry said later that the Azerbaijan was using tanks at the contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh and intensifying the fighting.

The emergency service of the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh said that the Azeri forces used the rocket launchers Grad and Smerch and had hit the towns of Martuni, Martakert and Askeran.

Fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh region reignited on September 27. Armenia and Azerbaijan have accused each other of initiating the hostilities. The international community has strongly condemned the escalation and called on parties to settle the differences via dialogue.

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Guterres Urges Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan to Reach Agreement on Renaissance Dam - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 26 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan to take concrete action to finalize an agreement on the long-lasting Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Monday.

Earlier in the day, African Union (AU) Chairman and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said the leaders of the three countries would hold the next round of talks on the issue on Tuesday under the auspices of the AU.

"The Secretary-General's position is one of supporting the ongoing efforts of Ramaphosa, who is encouraging the parties to reach a mutually beneficial agreement," Dujarric said. "The Secretary-General calls on all concerned countries to take concrete steps to finalize an agreement in the spirit of goodwill consensus and compromise."

The spokesman added that the GERD could become an instrument of cooperation and partnership between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan as they aim towards a peaceful and prosperous future.

Ethiopia has long been deadlocked in the Nile dam dispute with Sudan and Egypt, which fear that Addis Ababa's mega hydroelectric project would slash their access to water. The talks between the three countries are being brokered by the AU.

The latest round of negotiations was held on September 14 and ended with no deal.

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Russia to React if US Deploys INF-Range Missiles in Europe, Asia-Pacific - Antonov

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - Moscow will respond if the United States deploys intermediate and shorter-range ground-based missiles in Europe or Asia-Pacific region, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said during a panel discussion at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies on Monday.

"The Russian initiative to introduce mutual moratoriums on the deployment of the intermediate and shorter-range ground-based missiles in the regions of the world has been categorically rejected by the US and its NATO allies," Antonov said. "Moreover, Pentagon is rapidly developing systems previously prohibited under the [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces] Treaty and has already conducted two tests of such systems. Washington intends to deploy them in Asia-Pacific and Europe. The implementation of such plans in the Far East will pose a direct threat to Russia's national security and nuclear deterrence capability. We will be forced to react." Antonov said Russian President Vladimir Putin has proposed new steps to stabilize the situation with intermediate and shorter-range missiles.

"First, the President has reiterated our adherence to the previously announced moratorium on the deployment of INF missiles," he said. "Second, the Russian leader has suggested considering specific options for adopting mutual verification measures in order to address existing concerns. In particular, these are the verification measures with regard to the Aegis Ashore complexes with Mk-41 launchers that are deployed at US and NATO bases in Europe, as well as 9M729 missiles in the Kaliningrad Region."

Russia, he added, is ready to continue not to deploy 9M729 missiles in European Russia, "provided NATO countries take reciprocal steps that preclude the deployment of the weapons earlier prohibited under the INF Treaty in Europe."

"Russia is ready to search for ways to maintain stability and prevent missile crises "in a world without the INF Treaty" as it applies to the Asia-Pacific region," the ambassador said. Last year, the US unilaterally withdrew from the 1987 INF Treaty, which committed it and the other signatory, Russia, to getting rid of all nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers (310 to 3,417 miles). The INF Treaty between the US and Russia (initially the Soviet Union) was a hallmark of the detente diplomacy towards the end of the Cold War and guaranteed the nuclear safety of Europe. In 2019, US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the deal despite repeated calls from Russia and the international community to renegotiate and appease.

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Pedersen, Syria Foreign Minister Discuss Syrian Constitutional Committee - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, October 26 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen and Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem met in Damascus to discuss all issues related to the Syrian Constitutional Committee, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Monday.

"Geir Pedersen, the Special Envoy for Syria, has just left Damascus. Mr. Pedersen had comprehensive discussions with Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Expatriates Affairs Walid Muallem," Dujarric said. "Mr. Pederson touched upon all issues related to Security Council resolution 2254, including the Constitutional Committee."

Dujarric also said that Pedersen would continue consultations with the opposition Syria Negotiations Commission and brief the UN Security Council on the discussions on Tuesday.

On Sunday, a diplomatic source told Sputnik that the two officials had met to address the resumption of the Syrian Constitutional Committee's small group talks in Geneva.

The UN-backed Syrian Constitutional Committee is a product of long-standing efforts by international mediators to reconcile the Syrian government and opposition. The 150-member body with equal representation of the government, opposition and civil society was launched on October 30, 2019 to work toward drafting a new constitution.

The Syrian Constitutional Committee has a smaller committee within it consisting of 45 members - 15 from each of the three represented groups - that is engaged in preparing constitutional initiatives. The full Committee is responsible for adopting such initiatives. The most recent session of the Syrian Constitutional Committee took place late in August in Geneva.

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Russia Calls on US to Stop Bargaining for Benefits in Final Days of New START - Antonov

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - Moscow is urging Washington to cease its efforts to bargain for benefits in the last days of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Monday.

"We call on the United States to demonstrate political wisdom, confirm the responsibility for maintaining strategic stability. Reckless attempts to bargain for benefits in the final days of the operation of New START should be abandoned," Antonov said at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies. "Everybody is expecting us to extend the Treaty and continue the joint work on nuclear and missile arms control."

Antonov pointed out that Washington has bluntly refused to extend New START as it was signed. Although Moscow proposed to do it without any conditions.

"I would like to remind you that previously the Russian side voiced its concerns regarding a number of parameters of the Treaty implementation by the United States. We have decided to put off these issues for later consideration," Antonov said. "The United States has, in fact, taken the agreement hostage by conditioning its extension. To break the deadlock around New START we have decided to make two significant unilateral concessions."

Antonov said Russia agrees to extend the Treaty for 1 year instead of 5 that it prefers.

Moreover, it is ready to jointly with the United States undertake a political commitment to freeze the number of nuclear warheads that each side possesses for that period of time.

"Should this approach be acceptable for Washington, then the time gained by the extension of the New START Treaty could be used to conduct comprehensive bilateral negotiations on the future nuclear and missile arms control that must address all factors affecting strategic stability," he said. "These are missile defense, intermediate and shorter-range ground-based missiles, Global Strike systems, hypersonic delivery means, possible outer space weapons"

The treaty, he added, is virtually the only thing that prevents escalation of the nuclear and missile arms race.

"This golden standard of arms control successfully fulfills its central task of reducing and limiting the world's two largest nuclear arsenals. It also plays an important role in enhancing mutual transparency and predictability," the ambassador said.

The New START - the last arms control agreement between the United States and Russia - is set to expire in February 2021. Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin said a world without the New START would represent a full-blown threat. Putin suggested extending the bilateral arms deal for at least one year, without any conditions, so that the two sides could discuss all the parameters of the arms control during this period.

US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien called Putin's proposal a "non-starter." The United States had earlier suggested extending the treaty for one year if Moscow and Washington froze the number of their nuclear warheads during that period.

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Premature to Say US, Russia on Verge of Reaching a Deal to Extend New START - Antonov

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - It is too early to say that the United States and Russia are close to concluding a deal on extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), Russia Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies on Monday.

"At this stage, it would be premature to say that we are on the verge of an agreement or even that a common political understanding is within reach. The work continues at the expert level," Antonov said. "We hope that all substantial differences will be settled as a result of the dialogue. Finding a compromise is in the interest of not only our two countries, but also the security and stability of the whole world."

Antonov pointed out that the responsibility of Russia and the United States to maintain international security is increasing given the ongoing collapse of agreements and norms that disastrously diminish the level of trust between the participating nations and the re-emerging arms race.

The Russian ambassador noted that thanks to the agreements reached between President Vladimir Putin and President Donald Trump, the US-Russia strategic dialogue has been revitalized and several rounds of interagency consultations and expert meetings have taken place since late June.

"The discussions were substantive in nature. This can be attributed to the high professional level of both delegations composed of the representatives of the relevant departments, including defense agencies in the first place," Antonov said. "The two sides confirmed their mutual interest in continuing such dialogue."

Antonov also said that another positive result of the consultations was that the United States dropped its demand for China's immediate involvement in the bilateral arms control process.

"However, in the longer run, the administration would not give up on this idea. In our view, the United States' attempts to put pressure on Beijing are untenable," he said.

Antonov underscored that arms control talks must be carried out "in a free and voluntary manner with due consideration given to the legitimate interests of all the parties."

Russia is interested in having the United Kingdom and France become part of the discussions because how they possess nuclear stockpiles comparable to that of China, Antonov said.

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UN Mideast Special Coordinator Urges Israel to Cease Settlement Activities in West Bank

UNITED NATIONS, October 26 (Sputnik) - Israel should put an end to settlement-related activities in the occupied Palestinian territories as they represent an obstacle for achieving peace, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov said in a Security Council meeting on Monday.

"On 14 and 15 October, Israeli authorities advanced some 5,000 settlement housing units," Mladenov said. "Settlement-related activities should cease as they undermine the prospect of achieving a viable two-State solution in line with UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements."

The move by the High Planning Committee to resume the settlement activity, which represents one of the largest collective advancements to date deep inside the West Bank, is of great concern, Mladenov stated.

He added throughout October, Israeli authorities also demolished or seized 59 Palestinian structures in Area C of the West Bank and three in East Jerusalem, displacing 82 Palestinians and affecting 200 others.

Madenov explained that the demolitions took place due to the lack of Israeli-issued building permits, which are almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain.

"I urge Israel to cease demolitions and seizures of Palestinian property throughout the occupied West Bank,... and to allow Palestinians to develop their communities," Mladenov stressed.

For decades, Israel has been in conflict with Palestinians who have been seeking diplomatic recognition for an independent state on the territories of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli government has refused to recognize Palestine as an independent political and diplomatic entity and continues to build settlements in the occupied areas despite objections from the United Nations.

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UN Deeply Concerned by Reported Ceasefire Violations in Nagorno-Karabakh - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, October 26 (Sputnik) - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is deeply concerned by the reports of violations of the latest ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Monday.

The US-brokered ceasefire between the two nations came into force on Sunday.

"We welcome the agreement that was announced yesterday," Dujarric said. "We are obviously very deeply concerned by the reports that there are already ceasefire violations shortly after the parties agreed to implement the commitments for a third time in recent days."

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Russia Ready to Discuss Mutually Acceptable Solutions on Open Skies Treaty - Antonov

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - Russia is prepared to discuss with the United States any mutually acceptable solution with respect to the Open Skies Treaty (OST), Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Monday.

"We have repeatedly proved with concrete data that the allegations of Russia's noncompliance with the OST are baseless. We have got plenty of counter-claims to the United States regarding its implementation of the treaty," Antonov said. "That said, we are ready to seek mutually

acceptable solutions at the negotiating table. Unfortunately, such a solution could not be found during the OST state parties' special conference on July 6."

Antonov emphasized that Russia's additional steps with respect to the OST are not predetermined and while Moscow is considering all scenarios, it is ready to continue cooperating within the framework of the treaty.

"A lot will depend on addressing the organizational and technical issues arising from the US decision to withdraw from the Treaty," Antonov said.

Earlier in October, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said Russia is counting on the OST's full implementation in 2021 despite new challenges and previous destructive actions of some parties to the treaty.

The United States' decision to withdraw from the OST in late May has already caused serious damage to European security and Washington's NATO allies may have a conflict of obligations that must be ruled out, Ryabkov added.

The Treaty on Open Skies allows its participants to carry out aerial surveillance as part of a program of scheduled observation flights. More than 30 countries are participating in the program created to boost transparency of military activities.

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Democrats Urge Pence Not to Preside Over Senate Tuesday Due to COVID-19 Concerns - Letter

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - Ten Democratic senators wrote a letter to Vice President Mike Pence urging him to reconsider presiding over the US Senate session to confirm Judge Amy Coney Barrett as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court on Tuesday after five of his closest aides tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

"We are writing today about your reported intention to attend the final Senate vote on the nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barrett to be an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. With five of your closest aides recently testing positive for COVID-19, it is not a risk worth taking. We ask you to reconsider," the letter, co-signed by Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, said on Monday.

Five of Pence's advisors, including Chief of Staff Marc Short, have recently tested positive for the novel coronavirus, media reported.

The senators warned Pence that his presence during Tuesday's session would be in clear violation of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines as well as a violation of common decency and courtesy.

"Your presence alone could be very dangerous to many people - not just Senators, but to all the truly essential staff - both Democratic and Republican - who must be physically present inside the US Capitol for it to function," the letter said.

The US Vice President is also president of the US Senate and votes in cases when the 100 senators' votes are tied.

"You will not need to cast the deciding vote to break a tie. Your presence tomorrow would be purely ceremonial," the letter said.

Pence has repeatedly tested negative for the novel coronavirus over the last several days.

Barret is expected to be approved in a straight party-line vote in the Republican-led Senate on Monday.

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Moscow's Offer to Host Mideast Quartet Meeting Still On Table - Deputy Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, October 26 (Sputnik) - The Russian proposal to hold in Moscow a meeting of the Middle East Quartet to mediate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is still on the table, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said in a UN Security Council meeting on Monday.

"The Russian initiative to conduct Palestinian-Israeli high-level meeting in Moscow remains on the table," Vershinin said on behalf of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

According to the diplomat, Moscow is ready for the close cooperation with the members of the Quartet - the United Nations, the United States and the European - and for the involvement of regional players.

Vershinin added that direct attention during such talks should also be given to the socio-economic situation in the occupied Palestinian territories and the dire humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip.

In September, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in his address to the UN General Assembly urged the United Nations to convene early next year an international conference to relaunch the Middle East peace process to end the Israeli occupation.

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US Could Destroy Iranian Missiles Bound for Venezuela - Envoy Abrams

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will try to destroy Iranian long-range missiles bound for Venezuela, US Special Representative Elliott Abrams said on Monday.

"We will make every effort to stop [Iranian] shipments of long-range missiles, and if somehow they get to Venezuela they will be eliminated there," the official told Fox News.

He said the transfer is unacceptable and would not be "tolerated or permitted."

The sale comes after the United Nations arms embargo on Iran expired last Sunday.

The United States proposed prolonging the arms sale embargo at the UN Security Council on August 14, 2020, but the proposition was declined by the majority of the member states.

Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Amir Khatami has said that with arms embargo lifted, Tehran plans to sell more military products than purchase them.

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Russia Calls on US to Stop Bargaining for Benefits in Final Days of New START - Antonov

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - Moscow is urging Washington to cease its efforts to bargain for benefits in the last days of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Monday.

"We call on the United States to demonstrate political wisdom, confirm the responsibility for maintaining strategic stability. Reckless attempts to bargain for benefits in the final days of the operation of New START should be abandoned," Antonov said at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies. "Everybody is expecting us to extend the Treaty and continue the joint work on nuclear and missile arms control."

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Russia Ready to Discuss Mutually Acceptable Solutions on Open Skies Treaty - Antonov

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - Russia is prepared to discuss with the United States any mutually acceptable solutions regarding the Open Skies Treaty (OST), Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Monday.

"We have repeatedly proved with concrete data that the allegations of Russia's noncompliance with the OST are baseless. We have got plenty of counter-claims to the United States regarding its implementation of the Treaty," Antonov said. "That said, we are ready to seek mutually acceptable solutions at the negotiating table. Unfortunately, such a solution could not be found during the OST state parties' special conference on July 6."

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Premature to Say US, Russia on Verge of Reaching a Deal to Extend New START - Antonov

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - It is too early to say that the United States and Russia are close to concluding a deal on extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), Russia Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies on Monday.

"At this stage, it would be premature to say that we are on the verge of an agreement or even that a common political understanding is within reach. The work continues at the expert level," Antonov said. "We hope that all substantial differences will be settled as a result of the dialogue."

Finding a compromise is in the interest of not only our two countries, but also the security and stability of the whole world."

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Russia to React if US Deploys INF-Range Missiles in Europe, Asia-Pacific - Antonov

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - Moscow will respond if the United States deploys intermediate and shorter-range ground-based missiles in Europe or Asia-Pacific region, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said during a panel discussion at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies on Monday.

"The Russian initiative to introduce mutual moratoriums on the deployment of the intermediate and shorter-range ground-based missiles in the regions of the world has been categorically rejected by the US and its NATO allies," Antonov said. "Moreover, Pentagon is rapidly developing systems previously prohibited under the Treaty and has already conducted two tests of such systems. Washington intends to deploy them in Asia-Pacific and Europe. The implementation of such plans in the Far East will pose a direct threat to Russia's national security and nuclear deterrence capability. We will be forced to react."

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Barrett to Be Sworn-in Monday Evening if Confirmed by US Senate - White House

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - US Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barrett will be sworn in on Monday evening if her nomination is confirmed by the Senate this afternoon, White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows said.

"We are excited and very hopeful for a confirmation of one of the most qualified judges that I've had the opportunity to get to know on a personal basis and so we are excited about that confirmation that we hope will happen on the Senate floor this afternoon," Meadows said. "If that happens then we expect for, you know, a swearing-in to happen later this evening."

The US Senate will vote on Monday afternoon to confirm Judge Amy Coney Barrett as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court to replace late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell told a Capitol Hill press conference last Tuesday.

Meadows said the American people will be well-served with an independent legal mind from a very well qualified candidate if all goes well in the afternoon. Barrett's confirmation would be a great testimony to those that stay engaged and love and admire the rule of law, he added.

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US House Chairs Announce Probe into Pompeo's Convention Speech From Jerusalem - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - A federal office is investigating whether Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speech to the Republican National Convention from Jerusalem in August was a breach of the Hatch Act, Congress members Eliot Engel and Nita Lowey said in a statement on Monday.

"Our offices have confirmed that the Office of Special Counsel (OSC) has launched a probe into potential Hatch Act violations tied to Secretary Pompeo's speech to the Republican National Convention," the two Democrats who chair the House Committees on Foreign Affairs and Appropriations said.

The probe follows reports that the OSC was also investigating Pompeo's stated commitment to rush out more of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's emails by Election Day, the statement noted.

"The Department [of State] has repeatedly missed Congressional overseers' deadlines for producing documents on his recent domestic speeches that will help us understand whether they were improper political activities. So we're grateful to OSC - whom Mr. Pompeo can't fire as he did the Inspector General - for looking into this matter," Engel and Lowey said.

The State Department had a legal obligation under the Federal Records Act to create and retain documentation of its actions, including those by the secretary and Congress had every right to review those official records, the statement said.

Engel is leaving Congress at the end of this term after losing his party's primary election in his New York district.

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US Early Voting in Presidential Election Crosses 60Mln Mark - Elections Project

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) – More than 60 million Americans have already cast early ballots in the US presidential election scheduled for November 3, data from the US Elections Project showed on Monday.

The total number of early votes has reached 60,082,857, the US Elections Project said.

Of those, more than two-thirds, or 40,182,523, sent their ballots by mail, while another almost 20 million voted early in person.

However, some US states do not differentiate between mail-in ballots and in-person votes, the Elections Project cautioned.

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US Airstrike Kills 5 Taliban Fighters in Afghanistan - USFOR-A

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The United States' military killed five Taliban fighters in a "targeted airstrike" launched to defend Afghan security forces in the central province of Wardak, US Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) spokesman Sonny Leggett said on Monday.

"USFOR-A conducted a targeted strike in Nerkh, Wardak last night - in defense of the ANDSF [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] and in accordance with the US-TB [Taliban] Agreement - killing 5 Taliban fighters," Leggett said via Twitter.

The US military rejects allegations that it violated its agreement with the Taliban, along with accusations that the airstrike killed Afghan civilians, he added.

On February 29, the United States and the Taliban movement signed a peace deal in Doha, stipulating a gradual withdrawal of US troops, as well as the beginning of intra-Afghan negotiations and prisoner exchanges.

Peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban began in the Qatari capital on September 12. Both sides have expressed their commitment to reaching a long-lasting ceasefire, despite the occasional resumption of violence.

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US Welcomes Libya Ceasefire, Looks Forward to Outcome of UN-Backed Talks - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes the newly agreed ceasefire in Libya looks forward to the outcome of UN-brokered political talks that are getting underway with virtual meetings, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Monday.

"We welcome the announcement of Libyans signing a nationwide, immediate ceasefire agreement," Pompeo said. We look forward to the outcomes of the UN-facilitated Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and to supporting the transfer of power to a new executive authority to prepare for national elections."

Libya's warring parties signed the nationwide ceasefire deal on Friday at UN-facilitated 5+5 Joint Military Commission talks in Geneva. The political talks were scheduled to begin on Monday in a virtual format, ahead of an in-person meeting of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in Tunis on November 9, Acting Special Representative of the Secretary -General and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) Stephanie Williams said.

"We commend Libyan leadership on all sides for taking this courageous step," Pompeo said of the ceasefire deal. "It is crucial for this progress to continue and for all parties to the conflict to support this success. As the agreement states, all foreign fighters must leave the country within 90 days and allow Libyans to decide their own future."

Pompeo said the US also looks forward to the swift appointment of a new UN special envoy for Libya to ensure progress on national reconciliation efforts.

"We call on all Libyans to continue to build on the positive momentum of the ceasefire agreement, and on all external actors to support this process," he said.

The 5+5 Joint Military Commission, which emerged from January's Berlin peace conference on Libya, held its first round of talks back in February. The sides are seeking to achieve peace after years of conflict following the overthrow and assassination of former leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

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2020 US Election

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump and Democratic challenger Joe Biden a day after their final debate sparred over the future of the fossil fuel industry which could affect millions of workers in battleground territory, the same day courts shot down Republican efforts to curb mail-in voting in Pennsylvania and New Jersey as the overall early ballot count crossed the 50-million mark.

BIDEN BACKPEDALS ON OIL

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden tried to reassure oil industry workers they would keep their jobs after comments he made during his final debate with Trump. During last night's debate, Biden said as president he would transition from the oil industry, which must be replaced by renewable energy over time.

"We are not going to get rid of fossil fuels," Biden told reporters as quoted by The Hill on Friday. "We are getting rid of the subsidies for fossil fuels, but we're not getting rid of fossil fuels for a long time." The comments reportedly were made in Tennessee last night after Thursday's debate.

Trump tried to take advantage of the misstep in a tweet on Friday: "I hope Texas, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Oklahoma, North Dakota, and all of the rest were listening last night. High energy prices, massive jobs losses! Vote Trump."

Biden's lead has stabilized nationally at around 8 percent in recent surveys, but the polling in major battleground states such as Florida and Pennsylvania show tight races. Biden is ahead in eight of the top 12 swing states, but within the margin of error in all of them except Michigan.

63 MILLION WATCHED DEBATE

Some 63 million people, around one fifth of the total population of the United States and around 40 percent of the estimated voting public watched the second and final debate between President Donald Trump and Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden on Thursday. Interest in the final debate dropped from the 73.1 million people that had tuned into the first presidential debate on September 29. The viewing figures also did not measure up to the 71.5 million viewers that tuned into the final debate between Trump and then Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton on October 19, 2016.

50 MILLION VOTED EARLY

More than 50 million people have voted early so far in the US elections though the official main polling date is not until November 3, the US Elections Project announced.

The total number of early votes stood at 50,312,171, the project said on Friday. Of those, 35,079,446, or more than 70 percent were in the form of mail-in ballots, the project said. Only

15,232,725 people, or around 30 percent, less than half the mail-in number, had voted in person so far, it said.

TRUMP's COURT BATTLES

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled unanimously that mail ballots and applications can not be challenged or rejected because of signature mismatches, a court filing revealed.

"County boards of elections are prohibited from rejecting absentee or mail-in ballots based on signature comparison," Judge Debra Todd wrote in the court's opinion on Friday. The Trump campaign lost a similar court case in New Jersey later in the day.

Meanwhile, the Trump re-election campaign and the Nevada Republican Party are asking a judge to temporarily halt early ballot-counting in Clark County amid transparency concerns at the polls, a lawsuit revealed.

MCCONNELL DENIES HEALTH PROBLEMS.

Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell running for reelection in the US state of Kentucky against a Democratic candidate who leads him in the polls, denied he was suffering from health problems after being seen in public with badly discolored and bruised hands. McConnell denied there was anything wrong with him, Politico reported. The majority leader is ahead of challenger Amy McGrath, a former fighter pilot, by about 9 points on average in three recent polls.

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US Coast Guard Looks to Expand Presence in Pacific to Counter China's Activity - O'Brien

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The US Coast Guard is looking to expand its presence in the Pacific to counter China's harassment of vessels, National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said in a statement.

"The United States is a Pacific power," O'Brien on Friday. "The People's Republic of China's illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and harassment of vessels operating in the exclusive economic zones of other countries in the Indo-Pacific, threatens our sovereignty, as well as the sovereignty of our Pacific neighbors and endangers regional stability."

The US Coast Guard will soon evaluate whether to send fast response cutters in the American Samoa to the South Pacific for maritime security operations, O'Brien said.

The maritime missions can include fisheries patrols, bolstering maritime domain awareness and enforcement efforts with regional partners, O'Brien added.

US-China relations have significantly soured in the past several years with Washington accusing Beijing of unfair trade practices, a poor response to the coronavirus outbreak, human rights violations and unwarranted territorial disputes with neighboring countries. China has denied the accusations and has criticized the United States for various violations of international law.

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Canada's National Chief Calls for Dismissal of Federal Police Agency Head - Statement

TORONTO, October 26 (Sputnik) - Canada's National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Perry Bellegarde called for the dismissal of the federal police agency's Commissioner Brenda Lucki amid a conflict over lobster trapping in the province of Nova Scotia.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police and its Nova Scotia division, accused of mishandling a situation that resulted in one of the country's deadliest mass casualty events in April, is under fire again after videos surfaced showing officers failing to intervene in scenes where a mob of commercial fishermen destroyed lobsters and threatened indigenous fishers.

"Given months of civil unrest and multiple issues relating to the safety of First Nations people across the country, I will be writing to Prime Minister [Justin] Trudeau to express that we have lost confidence in Royal Canadian Mounted Police Commissioner Brenda Lucki," Bellegarde said via Twitter on Friday. "I am asking the Prime Minister to remove Commissioner Lucki and to replace her with someone who will focus their attention on public safety and combating racism." Relations between Canada's indigenous community and the RCMP have plummeted over the past year, with community leaders singling out multiple confrontations as evidence of systemic bias.

The tension was further exacerbated by the alleged inaction in Nova Scotia, where commercial fishermen have been furious with a local band engaging in lobster trapping outside the federally mandated commercial season, concerned that about the impact on lobster harvesting.

While the conflict has been simmering for weeks, it reached the active phase last Tuesday when a van containing lobster catch was torched in New Edinburgh, Nova Scotia, leading to string of violent events in which an indigenous chief was assaulted in a confrontation with local commercial fishermen and the torching of a lobster facility.

The Sipekne'katik First Nation says that they are simply exercising their right to a "moderate livelihood" through hunting and fishing as affirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada in the 1999 Marshall decision.

Speaking to reporters on Friday, Trudeau said that his government will continue to work with Commissioner Lucki to keep Canadians safe.

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Trump Sues to Halt Early Ballot Counting in Swing State of Nevada - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The Trump re-election campaign and the Nevada Republican Party are asking a judge to temporarily halt early ballot-counting in Clark County amid transparency concerns at the polls, a lawsuit revealed.

"Petitioners, Fred Kraus, Donald J. Trump for President, Inc. and the Nevada Republican Party (herein 'Petitioners'), by and through their attorneys, respectfully move this court under Nevada Rule of Civil Procedure 65(b) for a temporary restraining order barring Respondents from separating or counting ballots in Clark County until the proper procedures are in place that

facilitate transparency and allow for meaningful observation of the process by the public," the lawsuit said on Friday.

The lawsuit argues that Clark County Registrar Joseph Gloria failed to submit a plan by April 15 to assign people to observe the delivery, counting, handling and processing of ballots.

The Trump campaign and the Nevada Republican Party are asking a judge to issue a temporary restraining order.

The Nevada Independent newspaper reported on Friday that more than 190,000 mail ballots have been counted in Clark County.

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Trudeau Condemns Swastika Carved onto Canadian War Memorial - Statement

TORONTO, October 26 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau condemned the desecration of a war memorial in Ottawa.

On Friday morning, Ottawa Police issued an appeal for witnesses to come forward and identify a suspect, who is accused of using tools to carve a swastika on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the National War Memorial.

"The antisemitic desecration of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is completely unacceptable, and I strongly condemn this hateful act. I urge anyone with information regarding the perpetrator's identity to contact Ottawa Police," Trudeau said via Twitter on Friday.

The incident drew widespread condemnation from federal and local officials.

The incident is said to have happened on October 14, Ottawa Police said in a statement.

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Pennsylvania Supreme Court Rejects Rule to Discount Ballots Due to Signatures Mismatch

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled unanimously that mail ballots and applications can not be challenged or rejected because of signature mismatches, a court filing revealed.

"For all of the aforementioned reasons, we grant the Secretary's petition for declarative relief, and hold that county boards of elections are prohibited from rejecting absentee or mail-in ballots based on signature comparison conducted by county election officials or employees, or as the result of third-party challenges based on signature analysis and comparisons," Judge Debra Todd wrote in the court's opinion on Friday.

Last month, Pennsylvania issued guidance following as per that interpretation of the law, prompting the Trump campaign to challenge it in federal court as being unconstitutional. The court dismissed the lawsuit earlier in October.

Pennsylvania Secretary of State Kathy Boockvar asked the state's top court to affirm the legality of her directive on ballot rejections.

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Final Trump-Biden Debate Attracts 63 Million Viewers - Nielsen Ratings

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - About 63 million people tuned into the final presidential debate between President Donald Trump and Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden, the Nielsen marketing research firm said in a press release.

"An estimated 63 million people tuned in to watch the final debate of the 2020 presidential election on Thursday, Oct. 22, 2020," the release said on Friday.

Interest in the final debate dropped from the 73.1 million people that had tuned into the first presidential debate on September 29.

Thursday night's debate also did not measure up to the 71.5 million viewers that tuned into the final debate between Trump and then Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton on October 19, 2016.

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Pompeo Says US Adding IRGC Cyber Actors to Terrorist Watchlist Over Malicious Activity

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is adding several Iranian cyber actors to its terrorist watchlist for working with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to carry out malicious activity, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement.

"We are also adding several cyber actors to our terrorist watch list and databases for their known association with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization and Specially Designated Global Terrorist, which will effectively prevent those individuals and their families from traveling to the United States," Pompeo said in the statement on Friday.

Pompeo said the cyber actors helped with IRGC cyber operations, but he did not disclose who the individuals are or any specific IRGC operations.

On Thursday, the FBI and Department of Homeland Security issued a joint advisory warning that Iran is trying to undermine US voters' confidence in the electoral process by spreading disinformation about voter fraud and creating fictitious media sites to spread anti-American propaganda.

On Wednesday, Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe said that Iran had obtained voter registration information and had sent emails to intimidate US voters, incite social unrest and damage President Donald Trump in the presidential election.

